

## **John Minto for Mayor: “We need a Kiwi socialism”**

**Interview: The 15 year old  
fighting back against McDonald’s**

**Solidarity with Russian LGBT movement:  
Neither Washington nor Moscow  
but international queer liberation!**

Coalition governments and real change

What would Adam Smith have thought of neoliberalism?

**\$2**

ISSN 1177-074

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Dominion Rd, Auckland

or

Bank transfer:

38-9002-0817250-01

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## Donations and bequeathments

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*Fightback* magazine is now in its 20th year as we continue the long-term fight for socialism. Readers and supporters may consider remembering us in their will with assets or money that will help the struggle in the long-term. If this is you please put in your will 'Fightback, PO Box 10-282, Dominion Road, Auckland' as well as what you would like to leave to us.

- I** Welcome to the September 2013 issue of Fightback. Fightback is a socialist organisation in Aotearoa/NZ, and this is our monthly magazine.
- M** With the 2013 local body elections coming up, Fightback will be involved in electoral work alongside community struggles on the ground.
- A** Fightback does not believe socialism can be simply voted in, however electoral work combined with wider popular struggles can play a role in socialist transformation. "In an article originally printed on the Daily Blog, Mike Treen of Unite Union and the MANA Movement discusses strategy for the 2014 general election (page 15-16).
- R** Fightback supports the MANA Movement, which is standing candidates in the local body elections. Fightback writer Daphne Lawless interviews John Minto, who is standing for Mayor of Auckland on a MANA Movement ticket; (page 17-19) and Ian Anderson interviews Grant Brookes, a Fightback member who is standing on a Health First ticket endorsed by the MANA Movement (page 20-21).
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## About Fightback

Under our current system, democracy consists of a vote every 3 years. Most of our lives are lived under dictatorship, the dictatorship of bosses and WINZ case managers. Fightback stands for a system in which our workplaces, our schools, our universities are run democratically, for social need rather than private profit.

Fightback participates in the MANA Movement, whose stated mission is to bring "rangatiratanga to the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed." Capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa through colonisation, and the fight for indigenous self-determination is intimately connected with the fight for an egalitarian society. We also maintain an independent Marxist organisation outside of parliament, to offer a vision of a world beyond the parliamentary capitalist system.

Fightback stands against all forms of oppression. We believe working-class power, the struggle of the majority for self-determination, is the basis for ending all forms of oppression. However, we also recognise that daily inequities such as sexism must be addressed here and now, not just after the revolution.

Fightback is embedded in a range of struggles on the ground; including building a fighting trade union movement, movements for gender and sexual liberation, and anti-racism.

Fightback also publishes a monthly magazine, and a website, to offer a socialist perspective on ongoing struggles.

Fightback stands for struggle, solidarity and socialism.

# Fightback

Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism

Monthly magazine published by: **Fightback**

*Fightback* September 2013,  
Vol.1, No 7, Issue No 7

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# Queer liberation



## Solidarity with Russian LGBT movement: Neither Washington nor Moscow but international queer liberation!

by Ian Anderson, Fightback (Wellington).

Russia was arguably the first country to legalise homosexuality.

In the ferment between the revolution of 1905 and the revolution of 1917, liberal reformers argued that homosexuality should be decriminalised. A number of prominent men were open about their attraction to other men (as in most countries, lesbianism was never strictly illegal, although women attracted to each-other were forced to pursue their desires privately).

With the seizure of mass workers' power in 1917, the entire Criminal Code was repealed. History was open to be written through popular struggle and debate. After the Civil War and the formation of a new defensive state, the new Criminal Code of 1922 removed the crime of *muzhelozhstvo* ('men lying with men').

Drawing from medical and legal literature of the time, historian Dan Healey

has documented this period in his work *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*. Healey argues that the removal of sodomy from the 1922 Criminal Code was no accident, but rather an attempt to "secularise" gender relations.

This was a period of debate. Medical persecution and anti-gay attitudes persisted, alongside struggles for gender liberation.

It wasn't until 1933, with the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, that homosexuality was legally forbidden again. This was connected to a project of nation-building involving the reassertion of the nuclear family, prohibition of abortion and other gendered restrictions.

This history is necessary to understanding the current struggle over Russia's anti-gay laws; it is not a clash of 'Western' and 'Russian' values, but rather a more complex historical struggle of oppression and liberation.

### Putin regime clamp-down

Jumping forward nearly a century, it wasn't until the fall of the USSR in the early 1990s that gay relationships were again legalised. The current attack on queer rights, through both street violence and anti-gay laws, is a case of 'one step forward, two steps back.'

After nearly a decade of both legal and extra-legal violence, Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime has introduced laws forbidding 'propaganda for homosexuality,' protecting 'religious feeling' and scapegoating minorities as 'foreign agents.'

Vigilante gangs bait and assault queers, with tacit support from the government. Although the new laws theoretically target gay paedophiles, all gender non-conforming folk are targets. The gang torture and murder of a young gay teenager has received particular attention.

The Putin regime's introduction of anti-gay laws is part of a more generalised

nation-building project. The growth of violent fascist groups with tacit support for the government, strong links between the regime and the Russian Orthodox Church, repression of progressive social movements, attacks on ethnic minorities and queers, are all part of a broad cultural assault.

## No clash of civilisations

In endorsing the call to boycott the upcoming Winter Olympics in Russia, British commentator Stephen Fry argued that the “civilised world” could not associate itself with homophobia. Fry argued the Five Rings of the Olympics would be “forever besmirched” by endorsing homophobia.

The last Winter Olympics, held in Vancouver, caused controversy because it was held on stolen land. The 2012 Olympics, held in London, saw reports of prison-like conditions for staff. All ‘civilisation’ requires some bloodshed.

Although Fry’s references to the ‘civilised world,’ and ‘civilisation’ are passing phrases, these phrases reference a colonial East-West, Clash of Civilisations narrative. In this narrative, the civilised West must liberate the backwards East.

However, liberation of Russian queers can only come through struggles in Russia, not imposition from without. Barack Obama, current figurehead for US imperialism, recently snubbed Putin for a one-on-one meeting. Obama cited the regime’s decision to house US whistle-blower, and now refugee, Edward Snowden.

One liberal commentator bemoaned that Obama mainly snubbed Putin over human rights abuses in the US, rather than human rights abuses in Russia. However, those of us who stand with Russian queers must be wary of any attempts to link their struggle with the pursuit of US imperialist power.

It is worth noting that human rights abuses in countries that rival, or challenge, the US often receive more

attention than abuses in countries fully backed by the US.

For example, while the abuses of Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe are widely known, the vicious atrocities of US-backed oil baron Teodoro Obiang (President of fellow African republic Equatorial Guinea) receive little attention.

Meanwhile, unsurprising cables released by WikiLeaks revealed that in Europe, US agents pursued a deliberate strategy of highlighting women’s oppression in Afghanistan in the leadup to the war, in an attempt to win over European public opinion.

This is not to say that the visible oppression of Russian queers is a lie concocted by Western conspiracy. However, we must be wary of any attempts to co-opt such struggles into a pro-US narrative.

## International queer liberation

Russia’s LGBT movement is visible and tenacious. Alongside images of brutalised queers in Russia, images of public rainbow flags and protestors confronting vigilantes circulate globally.

Western progressives must take a lead from the Russian LGBT movement.

This is never a simple matter, as gay men in Russia do not agree on everything, let alone agreeing with all lesbians, transfolk and queers combined. However, there is a real movement in Russia with real voices, and we ignore those voices at our peril.

At the end of July, the Russian LGBT Network released a statement opposing a boycott on the Russian Winter Olympics. This Network reportedly combines 13 regional branches and 10 regional LGBT organisations, so it represents significant forces on the ground. Instead of a boycott, the Network argued for visible opposition by participants:

“Participation and attendance of the Games in Sochi will not indicate endorsement of injustice and discrimi-

nation; they will only if they are silent. We hope to join forces and succeed in raising everyone’s voices for LGBT equality in Russia and elsewhere. We hope that together with those who share this vision, we will succeed in sending the strongest message possible by involving athletes, diplomats, sponsors, and spectators to show up and speak up, proclaiming equality in most compelling ways.”

Previous attempts to boycott Olympic games – including Berlin in 1936, Moscow in 1980, and Los Angeles in 1984 – have proved largely ineffectual. By contrast, the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico Olympics resonated globally as part of a broader upsurge against imperialism, and remains an iconic, inspiring image.

In recent days at the World Athletics Championship, two female Russian athletes defied repression by kissing each other on the podium. A Swedish athlete caused controversy by painting her nails in rainbow colours. These actions must be supported and amplified.

The Queer Avengers, an activist group in Aotearoa/NZ, contacted the Russian LGBT Network informing them that QA planned to hold an action outside the Russian embassy. Although the Network had discouraged international groups from an Olympics boycott, they responded “It’s highly appreciated by us – do it and be noisy!”

Tactics to confront repression can and must be debated, and boycotts are worth considering. The call for skepticism about boycotts is not a call for inaction, but rather for action that amplifies, stands in solidarity with, and considers the specific situation of the existing LGBT movement in Russia.

Crucially, liberation for Russian queers will come not through Russian adoption of ‘Western’ or ‘civilised’ values. Liberation can only come through the struggle within Russia – and the global struggle acting in solidarity.

# Queer liberation/Theory

# BEYOND

DISCUSSION AND ACTION ON GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY

Wellington event: 'Beyond' (discussion and action on gender and sexual diversity)

'Beyond' is a weekend of discussion and action on gender and sexual diversity. Organised by the Queer Avengers, the conference will be held from the 11th-13th of October at Wellington High School.

In the wake of the parliamentary

win for marriage rights, this conference aims to look beyond marriage towards an inclusive movement for gender and sexual liberation. With a mixture of presentations, panels and workshops, the conference aims to address the lived experiences of queer/trans people in relation to identity, race, disability, the media, healthcare, parenting, education and imprisonment (among others).

Broadly, the Saturday will be focused on discussions of experience, identity and intersectionality, and the Sunday will be centred around skill sharing and campaign work. Throughout the weekend there will also be opportunities for networking, informal discussion and socialising.

Detailed schedule to come. Please see our website, [beyond.org.nz](http://beyond.org.nz), for more information.

## What would Adam Smith have thought of neoliberalism?

by Ciaran Doolin, Fightback.

Adam Smith was a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and is considered to be one of the founders of the economics discipline. His greatest work *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, argued the benefits of capitalist enterprise and market economy. The Chicago School-led resurgence of classical economics drew heavily on Smith's market ideas. Their reading of Smith is, however, so selective that it's likely if Smith were alive today he would barely recognise what they call free-market capitalism.

### Smith and the early industrial revolution

Smith was writing in the early stages of the industrial revolution when modern

manufacturing and industry were only in nascent development. Although he died before the industrial revolution reached its zenith, he foresaw the monumental changes it would bring. Criticising the division of labour, he wrote:

"[T]he understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible

for a human creature to become."

And he predicted that "in every improved and civilised society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall unless government takes some pains to prevent it." Alienating practices such as the division of labour, he argued, would stifle productivity growth and reduce efficiency:

"It can never be the interest of the unproductive class to oppress the other two classes. It is the surplus produce...what remains after deducting the maintenance... that maintains and employs the unproductive class. The greater this surplus the greater must likewise be the maintenance and employment of that class. The establishment of perfect justice, of perfect



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liberty, and of perfect equality is the very simple secret which most effectually secures the highest degree of prosperity to all the three classes."

The last line here is crucial. Only under "perfect" conditions does a market system, according to Smith, distribute the benefits of wealth accumulation equitably. Really existing capitalism has never come remotely close to meeting this prerequisite, nor end.

## The role of the State

The politicians and technocrats who instituted neoliberalism in New Zealand during the 1980s were acutely aware of the dual role a democracy could play – as a servant to capital, if properly managed and contained, or as a shield of the people, protecting them from the whims of capital. With a view to diminishing the latter role, they implemented radical

changes that were inimical to democracy. The state sector, particularly the organisations responsible for maintaining the welfare system, was gutted and the sector restructured such that public involvement and oversight of policy design and implementation was tightly constrained. During a parliamentary debate early in the reform process, Richard Prebble, Roger Douglas' leading supporter in government, enunciated the spirit of age:

The myth is that the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making the people decide for themselves. The reality is the process of arriving at decisions through a competitive struggle for the people's vote. Party politicians are the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede.

Adam Smith understood what the purpose of a government without a social role, unaccountable to the "stampeding masses", would be: "Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all." Moreover, Smith also knew that perfect justice, liberty and equality were aspirations rather than a reality. Therefore, in stark contrast to the neoliberals, he argued in favour of the government acting as a shield for the people when necessary:

The interest of the dealers...is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public. To widen the market and to narrow the competition, is always the interest of the dealers... The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which

# Theory

comes from this order ought...never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.

He even went so far as to call for progressive taxation: "The subjects of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities."

## The invisible hand of the market?

Perhaps the most well-known phrase from Wealth of Nations is the "invisible hand". It is also uniformly misquoted as an argument for free trade. To illustrate this, the full passage in which the phrase appears is compared with the selection of Paul Samuelson's standard textbook Economics [emphasis added to Samuelson's selection]:

As every individual...therefore, endeavours as much as he can, both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the general [recte public] interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security, and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest

value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

In context, Smith argues for free-trade on the basis of a supposition that a bias towards the home country of the traders acts to prevent them from seeking out cheaper raw materials or more flexible labour markets overseas. Globalisation has demonstrated the fallacy of this assumption – corporations owe their allegiances not to the development of their country of origin but only to profit wherever it can be found. As Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz notes that "the reason that the invisible hand often seems invisible is that it is often not there. Whenever there are 'externalities' – where the actions of an individual have impacts on others for which they do not pay, or for which they are not compensated – markets will not work well." Had Smith foreseen this he might well have been a critic of the trade liberalisation regimes that were to follow.

## Re-evaluating Smith

Marx was a great admirer of Smith and saw him, alongside David Ricardo, as the culmination of a strand of thought beginning with Boisguilbert and William Petty. The principal criticism Marx made of this school, however, was its methodology. As he observes in *Theories of Surplus Value* [emphasis added]:

Classical political economy seeks to reduce the various fixed and mutually alien forms of wealth to their inner unity by means of analysis and to strip away the form in which they exist independently

alongside one another . . . It often attempts directly, leaving out the immediate links, to carry through the reduction and prove that the various forms are derived from one and the same source. This is however a necessary consequence of its analytical method, with which criticism and understanding must begin. Classical economy is not interested in elaborating how the various forms come into being, but seeks to reduce them to their unity by means of analysis, because it starts from them as given premises. But analysis is the prerequisite of genetical presentation and of the understanding of the real, formative process and its different phases.

Or, as he argues more succinctly in *Poverty of Philosophy*, "what they do not explain is how these relations themselves are produced, that is the historical movement that gave them birth". The methodological limitations of classical political economy were thrown into sharp relief in the 1830's as the working-class emerged in Britain, validating Marx's critiques and suggesting the possibility of a new stage of human development where the exploitation of man by man might be abolished.

Smith was clearly in favour of markets – but only for free markets under strict conditions. Even if those conditions were met, it is unlikely they would have had the effect he anticipated. Slight differentials in ability, life experience or environment in a society where private property remains would quickly lead to the re-emergence of a class system. Even perfect capitalism would still exploit people, a fact which necessitates the struggle for socialism.

In any event, far from moving towards conditions of perfect justice, liberty and equality, capitalist society is palpably moving towards the opposite pole. Despite the attempts by the neoliberals to associate "freedom" with the "market" the reality for all but a fraction of the

worlds' population are fewer choices and greater hardship.

Describing the demise of the aristocracy at the beginning of the industrial revolution Smith observes: the aristocracy "gradually bartered their whole power and authority" to the emerging bourgeoisie by wasting their wealth on "frivolous and useless...vanities" to eschew the costs of supporting those workers they exploited to accumulate their wealth. He bitterly condemns this behaviour: "All for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind." The neoliberal prescription has generated a new aristocracy. The excesses of this new class are without precedent and are producing inequalities of record proportions. These structural excesses are bringing to the surface internal contradictions in the capitalist system which had lain barely dormant. The new aristocracy would do well to be mindful of the insights of a man to whom they declare their devotion but whose work they apparently haven't read.

## Why you should get involved in Fightback

### We support trade union activism

Because we believe that only the working class can create socialism, we are active in the basic organisations of the working class, the trade unions. Currently, unions are generally dominated by middle-class bureaucrats who see themselves as peacemakers between workers and bosses. We work towards transforming unions into strong, democratic, fighting organisations, controlled by their members. Such unions will mobilise workers for struggle in

the workplace and society through strikes, workplace occupations and other forms of militant action. In an economic crisis they are more important than ever. We join in the struggle to extend the union movement to the majority of workers who are not yet organised, especially the campaigns by Unite Union to involve youth and workers who have insecure conditions. We stand with workers in struggle for better rights and conditions, and initiate discussion on revolutionary ideas through strike bulletins and electronic media.

### We support student-worker solidarity

On campus and in schools, Workers Party members are actively trying to rebuild the radical student movement. We oppose fees, demand living grants for students, and fight for free speech. We encourage students to link their

struggles with those of the working class. Workers ultimately pay most of the bill for education, even in a semi-private university system such as we have. Workers will be won to the idea of free education from kindergarten to university if they see students willing to support their struggles.

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# Industrial struggle

## Leaflet: Stop the scab bills!



Fightback member Grant Brookes speaks at the Wellington Fairness at Work rally.

*Originally distributed by Fightback at Fairness at Work rallies.*

Clearly we must oppose National's attacks.

As Greg Lloyd, EPMU General Counsel pointed out in his article "Looking at the Big Picture," the apparently minor and technical changes in the ERA Amendment Bill amount to an attempt to undermine collective bargaining.

Meanwhile, Jami-Lee Ross' private members' bill allows employers to bring in temporary staff (scabs) while workers are on strike.

We can only improve our wages and conditions if we oppose these attacks, and defend the right to collectively bargain at a minimum.

### Not just about voting

The National government needs to be defeated.

However, during 9 years of a Labour Party government, real wages continued to decline while the rich list shot up. Labour's Employment Relations Act also contains significant restrictions on the right to strike, which is necessary to workers' power.

It was only a mass campaign under the slogan Supersizemypay, including both political campaigning and industrial action, that finally saw the rise to a \$12 minimum wage in 2008.

Regardless of who is in parliament, we must organise in our communities to challenge these attacks from the ground up.

### We need fighting unions

Labour leaders including Darien Fenton have argued that the scab bill is unnecessary, because strike rates are so low. However, the lack of strike action is part of the problem.

Unions currently cover less than 10% of the private sector, while real wages have declined 25% over the past 30 years.

In Europe and elsewhere, generalised strike action has confronted the march of austerity and offered a vision of peoples' power. We need to rebuild a union movement willing to take action, in workplaces and communities, to challenge the attacks of successive Labour and National governments.

## State Gives McDonald's \$270,000 In Subsidies

*Article and Official Information Act request by Byron Clark, Fightback.*

In 2009 the Ministry of Social Development began paying wage subsidies to McDonalds when the company hired beneficiaries through the Flexi-wage and Skill Investment Subsidy programmes, the latter of which has now ceased. This allowed McDonalds to receive public money for employing a former beneficiary, longer term beneficiaries would attract a larger subsidy, though there has never been any evidence that McDonalds is employing more people than they would otherwise.

McDonalds is not a charity providing jobs, nor are they a volunteer based NGO that hires paid staff based on the availability of funding. As a for profit corporation, McDonalds has a duty to return a profit to shareholders and will hire the amount of workers required to produce and sell their product. Even

with subsidies it is not in their interests to hire more workers than required, as this would be an unnecessary expense. So just how much public money has been paid to McDonalds? Figures obtained under the Official Information Act reveal that \$272,574 was paid between July 1 2009, when the subsidies began, and June 30 this year. This was for hiring 110 beneficiaries. Some McDonald's restaurants are listed with Work and Income under their individual franchise, and are not included in that figure, so the total is likely to be higher. A further 700 beneficiaries were hired without McDonalds receiving wage subsidies.

While receiving tax payer money, McDonalds in New Zealand has also been accused of using accounting tricks to avoid paying tax. A large amount of revenue is excluded from taxable profit because it used to pay for use of the McDonalds trademark, \$50 million more was spent on trademark fees than

tax in the past three years.

McDonalds has an income of about \$200 million a year in New Zealand, so the wage subsidies are just a drop in the bucket, this doesn't mean they are insignificant however, rather it raises the question of why public money should be spent adding to an overflowing bucket. For the past several months workers at McDonalds have been taking industrial action in an attempt to improve wages or conditions. The company is known for paying lower wages and offering fewer benefits than others in the fast food industry, where Unite has made significant gains for workers. The company is known for paying lower wages and offering fewer benefits than others in the fast food industry, where Unite has made significant gains for workers. Unlocking the wealth generated by McDonald's workers, and by the majority of workers who pay tax, could lay the basis for a system based on social need rather than private profit.

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## Interview: The 15 year old fighting back against McDonald's

*Interview with Hassan Al-Fadhi, striking McDonald's worker. Originally published on Unite News.*

**U:** Who are you and what do you do?

**H:** My name is Hassan. I'm 15 years old, I'm a student at Glenfield College and I work part time at McDonald's.

**U:** What happened tonight?

**H:** Tonight I was working in the kitchen at McDonald's in Wairau Park [Auckland]. My union organiser, Shane, came in and said that it was a perfect time to go on strike because it was so

busy. Nearly all of the people working were members of the union but they were really scared. I thought 'screw this', clocked out and told the restaurant manager I was going on strike. I took off my gloves and apron and walked out.

**U:** Did anyone come with you?

**H:** My friend Marienne came on strike with me too, even though she was scared before. Then we went to Constellation Drive McDonald's and three more workers came on strike with us. I'm happy that I stood up for myself and I'm stoked that Marienne and the other workers came too. Now that everyone

has seen that we went on strike and nothing bad happened I think they will come next time.

**U:** Why should McDonald's workers go on strike?

**H:** McDonald's workers should all go on strike because we work really hard but we need more hours and we need more pay. When we don't strike no one listens to us. If they don't listen the first time we need to keep striking until they do.

**U:** Are you proud of yourself?

# Industrial struggle/International

H: Yep, and Marienne too.

*Editorial note: While we are going to print, Unite has reached a new collective agree-*

*ment with McDonald's, ending the recent industrial dispute. The new contract has gains in security of hours and the union has grown, although it only won a pay rise of*

*30 cents. Fightback will publish analysis of the dispute in our October 2013 issue.*



McDonald's workers Hassan and Marienne on strike recently.

## Fijian sugar workers face threats, intimidation

by Byron Clark

Workers at the state owned Fijian Sugar Corporation (FSC) have voted to take strike action after they were offered a 5.3% pay rise. This equates to just \$7.10 a week after tax; or in terms of purchasing power, enough to buy half a chicken. The bigger issue though is that wages for sugar workers in Fiji have declined 40% since 2006 when the government was deposed by a military coup.

Sugar is Fiji's largest industry, with sugar processing making up a third of industrial production in the country. The Lautoka sugar mill workers, who crush sugarcane to extract sugar, have also been impacted by a decline in the country's sugar crop over this time, from 3.8 million tonnes to 1.6 million tonnes annually, resulting in less weeks of work each year. In some cases people were without work for eight months of the year. The Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union (FS&GWU) has been

demanding a wage review for two years. Just days before the vote to take strike action, a worker was fatally injured on the job. Samuel Sigatokacake was admitted to Lautoka Hospital ICU Unit with burns covering over 50% of his body. The accident occurred when the support structure of an evaporator gave way, pouring extremely hot water onto the factory floor. Further investigation found the release valve on the vessel, which stored water at high pressure, had not functioned since 2010. The vessel



Workers from the Karnataka Sugar Mill Workers Union of Shree Someshwar Cooperative Sugar Mill, Belwadi, India, protest attempts by Fijian Sugar bosses to bring in workers from India to break the strike in Fiji.

itself was in very poor condition with corosions found on the inside. Earlier that same week it had burst through the cracks in the welding, but cracks were re-welded and operations continued as normal. The union has since made a Criminal Negligence Complaint.

The management of the mill has intimidated workers, requiring some employees to fill in a form indicating if they were going on strike. Others were threatened with termination if they took industrial action.. Others were threatened with termination if they took industrial action. Almost a third of the 770 workers did not vote in the secret ballot, likely a result of this intimidation, but of those who voted 90% were in favour of strike action. Management has also offered five year contracts to retired workers to take on the work of

the strikers, and threatened to bring in workers from overseas to replace them. Fiji's Attorney General and Minister for Industry and Trade Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum urged workers not to go on strike: "We [the Government] have made a substantial investment to rescue the industry from collapse. This investment has begun to turn around the Fiji Sugar Corporation, without a single job being lost, and it is in the national interest for this to continue". Of course, workers have seen little benefit from this investment; instead they have seen seven years of declining wages.

"It is a sad indictment on the Regime where the workers' real wage is allowed to decline by more than 40% forcing workers into extreme poverty", said union president Daniel Urai. "Workers deserve recognition from this Regime in

the development of the Sugar Industry and indeed in all other industries in this country. Workers create the wealth and sustain the economy despite the hardship, intimidation and the bullying by the authorities and they deserve better".

On August 21st two truckloads of military officers drove into Lautoka. Workers were warned that should they go on strike, they would not be allowed to return to work, and would be dealt with by the military. As we go to press no industrial action has yet occurred and the company continues to refuse to negotiate with the union. Unions in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere have expressed solidarity with the sugar workers and condemned the actions of the regime, while unions in India have promised to refuse to send scabs if the strikes happen.



Union members from the Bhogawati Cooperative Sugar Mill, Kumbhi-Kasari Cooperative Sugar Mill, and the Chhatrapati Rajaram Cooperative Sugar Mill in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, protest against plans to break the strike in Fiji using Indian workers



# Student Debt: Reinforcing the Logic of Capitalism

by Thomas Roud, Christchurch Fightback branch.

Under liberal capitalist democracy the University is lauded as a cultural beacon, where the new generation of leaders and entrepreneurs develop themselves and explore new horizons. The reality of university life is one dominated by the corporate hierarchical model and ever present “market forces”.

Student debt in Aotearoa/NZ is over \$10 billion dollars. The average student debt as calculated in 2007 was \$28,000, a 54% rise since 2004. While the student loan scheme allows for interest free loans for tertiary study, debt itself controls the function of the university as well as the decisions of students.

A student taking on the average debt of \$28,000 will be required to make compulsory repayments once they earn over a certain threshold (approximately \$19,000 per annum). This effectively functions as an additional 12% tax on the income of post tertiary

workers. With less and less job opportunities, many undergraduates are leaving university without easily finding employment. While students’ ability to study is largely supported by the working class, many students after attaining their degree will enter the working class themselves rather than high level positions in the ruling class.

The material reality of a large student debt can therefore act as a coercive force, providing an incentive to study those fields which are believed to have the most lucrative career option. The mythos of higher education has always been one of self-improvement; however due to this material reality of debt, many students will instead pursue study which they lack interest in and may not be particularly skilled at to begin with. In essence, accepting the logic to compete for jobs that pay well weakens the ability for the student to succeed at all.

This trend is reinforced constantly, with the University of Canterbury in a permanent state of ‘restructuring’. This

restructuring has resulted in Gender Studies, Religious Studies, American Studies, and most languages either being completely cut or removed as options for a major. The struggle to resist these changes has not been successful, aside from Theatre and Film Studies being consistently threatened with the axe. Even more concerning is the apparent motivations for these cuts which do not always have an economic incentive. Universities function as a business, have shareholders etc. who are the only people the University is truly accountable to. However, many of the subjects being integrated or eliminated are not drains on university resources. There is an ideological motive for stripping back all subjects deemed ‘unnecessary’ by capitalism and the ruling class. Those areas which are not useful for capitalism are neglected.

Universities largely maintain ideological hegemony, or the system of ideas that justify capitalist rule. Economics degrees spend no time at all on one of the most

## Tertiary education/Elections

comprehensive studies of capitalism itself, Marx's Capital.

Students of anthropology, sociology, philosophy and other supposedly critical subjects will find themselves largely focusing on the hegemonic ideas of the time – those that serve the ruling class. Political Science degrees merely reinforce capitalism and liberal democracy as the best system, with horizons limited to different regimes of regulation. Even if some fields of critical work support counter-hegemony in theory, any transformative practice will be sharply opposed by management. Transformation of universities therefore requires developing radical student and staff organizations that can confront management.

Eroding the myth around the function of tertiary education brings to light an insight the Left has seen for well

over a century – that for all the talk of individual choice and self-improvement, capitalism actually fails to deliver any of those things to all but the elite. More than that, capitalism is unable to provide for the interests and needs of all because it requires the subjugation of the majority in order for the minority to have all of their needs and interests tended to. Even within the bastion of liberal "progressive" thinking, the Academy, the individual loses out to capitalism.

At first glance it may appear that student debt is the problem, and if university was free and accessible to all we would have more freedom to pursue our interests. This ignores the fact that the university still exists as an institution within a capitalist economy. If it cannot make money, it will need to be funded through the state via taxation – a disproportionate amount always being

taken from working class people. It is only through systematic change that education can become something valuable. With an economy based on social need rather than profit, it will become clear that the ability and facilities for people to pursue their interests are essential for an egalitarian society within the realm of social need. Moreover, the entire organization of the university must be rebuilt under the direct control of students, working with educators, rather than dictated by a managing board whose primary interests are making money.

Any struggle for zero fees should also seek the transformation of universities as a whole. Radical democratic control by students and staff, rather than by bureaucratic top-down control in pursuit of profit, would allow for a huge expansion of personal freedom.



# Coalition governments and real change

# Elections

by Mike Treen of Unite Union and the MANA Movement. Originally printed on the Daily Blog.

Can a party that wants fundamental changes in society be a minor part of a coalition government?

My conclusion is no after having been a participant in the Alliance Party's implosion after attempting to do so from 1999-2002 as part of the Labour-led government. But that does not mean that a minor party can't be an effective player in parliament for reforms while continuing to build a movement outside of parliament as well for real change.

Similar disasters befell radical left or Green parties in many countries. In most cases there existed a moderate centrist Labour or social democratic party that had strong support from working people but was committed to the existing system including the system of worldwide alliances with the US-led western imperial ambitions.

Pressure always comes on the smaller more radical party to oppose the more right wing parties and support the "lesser evil" of social democracy. Many working people who either have illusions that their traditional party will make real change, or simply accept – albeit unenthusiastically – the reality of lesser evilism will also often want their party to ally with parties to their left rather than their right in the hope of more progressive policies emerging. It is always worth remembering that not all Labour governments are a lesser evil. It would be hard to argue that was true for the 1984-90 Labour government.

This was true in 1999 in New Zealand. There was genuine enthusiasm when Helen Clark extended the olive branch to the Alliance Party at its conference that year and what was effectively an alternative coalition in waiting won the election.

Alliance leader Jim Anderton was made deputy prime minister and three others got cabinet posts but the party essentially disappeared from view into Labour's

embraces and it's policies were seen as essentially the same. The government remained reasonably popular but the Alliance Party's support collapsed in the polls. Technically the party retained the right to differentiate its own position from that of the larger partner while remaining in cabinet but this was rarely invoked. Then when the decision was made to send troops to Afghanistan it provoked a bitter internal fight with the vast majority of the party rejecting the decision by Anderton and a majority of Alliance MP's to support the government's position. The Alliance was eliminated from parliament at the 2002 election and Anderton's faction has simply been absorbed into the Labour Party.

The problem for a genuinely radical party is that it only has minority support and cannot impose any significant policy change on a party committed to the existing system. So long as that system is based on serving the 1% then only small and relatively minor progressive changes are achievable. That was the case for the Alliance which achieved the establishment of Kiwibank and Paid Parental Leave and some labour law reforms despite significant opposition from elements in the Labour Party at the time. But these changes weren't enough to significantly change the position of working people in the country. They weren't enough to give people hope that unemployment could be eliminated, inequality radically reduced, democratic control exerted over the key sectors of the economy.

If the Alliance had remained outside of cabinet it could probably have negotiated for all the changes it actually achieved but remained free to agitate and mobilise people in the streets for the more radical changes that are needed to make a real improvement to the lives of working people.

The Greens will face a similar challenge if they can achieve a majority able to form a government with Labour after the next election. The Greens have already taken the first significant steps to becoming a "partner" in running the

existing system rather than challenging it when they signed up to the ETS as a mechanism to combat climate change. They know that the ETS, or any other market-based mechanism, cannot make any real impact in combating a threat to humanity that has arisen as a consequence of the free market system in the first place.

Protecting the environment and protecting the rights and living standards of the vast majority of people in the world requires the system of capitalism to be superseded. That requires a radical social and political movement that aspires to win a majority in the country – not simply assume the role of "junior partner" to a party that remains fundamentally committed to the current system.

The Mana Movement, which is in my view a system challenging movement, may also face a similar problem if the election is close and Labour and the Greens (and NZ First?) require their vote to form a government. They too will be in a position to negotiate some reforms that benefit the people who support it as part of a negotiated agreement to allow a Labour-led government to be formed. By doing so they will respect the fact that for now they are a minority party and the majority of the people they want to represent have voted for Labour or the Greens. That democratic choice can be respected.

At the same time Mana can retain their freedom of criticism and ability to organise at the grass roots for the generally timid reforms to go further or against any reactionary policies that such a government will inevitably end up promoting. So long as these parties in government are trying to make a system "work" they can't escape ultimately disappointing their own supporters because for this system to work it will continue to produce economic crisis, unemployment and environmental destruction. Movements like Mana can then provide a progressive alternative for those people rather than have that disappointment captured by the right.

# John Minto for Mayor: “We need a Kiwi socialism”



*The latest opinion polls put John Minto – teacher, veteran activist and MANA movement candidate – in third place in the race for Mayor of Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland. Fightback writer Daphne Lawless caught up with him at his campaign headquarters.*

Why has John Minto decided to run for the most powerful urban office in Aotearoa/New Zealand? He hesitates for quite a long time before answering – he calls it “the hardest question”.

It's certainly not a question of seeking

the limelight. A recent interview in the NZ Herald by Michelle Hewitson focussed relentlessly on delving Minto's personality – and bringing up what John calls “the wallpaper of history” about his 30-year activist career. So he seems quite relieved that Fightback is interested in his campaign's politics.

“I wouldn't have stood as an independent”, he tells us. ‘The MANA Movement is “keen to raise its profile in the community,” he explains, as a “building-block” for the general election next year.

A major goal of the Minto for Mayor

campaign, John explains, is to change the perception of MANA as simply a Maori Party split, with Pakeha (European-ethnicity) leftists merely being supporters of Maori aspirations. John gives this as the reason why, in the last general election in 2011, “all of the MANA candidates in general seats bombed”, and only their main Maori spokesperson, Hone Harawira, was elected to Parliament.

Building “a broader base for MANA in Tamaki” is thus a crucial goal of the campaign. To this end, John mentions the role of revolutionary leftists – in

# Elections

particular the Socialist Aotearoa group – in his campaign, alongside single-issue activists such as the Tamaki Housing Group and some individual Green Party members.

## Fence-sitting

Len Brown, the incumbent Mayor of Auckland, was elected as a centre-left candidate, but his time in office has been marked by fence-sitting and compromise with the forces of big business. One major issue that the MANA campaign harps on is Brown's silence while the council-owned Ports of Auckland locked out its waterside workers. As mayor, Minto explains, "I would absolutely weigh in on the side of the workers."

Some argue that a left-wing Mayor would be restricted in what he or she could do by their Council or by the "commercial independence" of the Council-Controlled Organisations (CCOs). Minto will have none of this. "The mayor has got enormous power – if he gets involved, the thing is going to be sorted." He has no illusions that his policies "would be fought fiercely" by the usual suspects such as the Chamber of Commerce – "that's when you have to call on the community for support."

The Minto for Mayor campaign certainly stands out in the Auckland elections on the basis of its emphasis on policy. John's billboards emphasise one of his core planks - "Free and Frequent Public Transport". This contrasts with the meaningless buzzwords like "strong voices", "community", and "caring" put about by the other campaigns and candidates.

"We've got big solutions to the problems facing Auckland", says Minto. "Our four major policies will bring major benefits to low-income people, particularly."

## Public transport

"Free and Frequent Public Transport" is

the #1 plank of Minto for Mayor. The Brown administration has recently crowed of its successes in negotiating \$10 billion of transport funding from central Government – although the majority of this will be spent on roads.

Minto doesn't mince words about what he thinks of this – "a crock". He points out that experts agree that road-building cannot avert total gridlock in Auckland within seven years. Minto predicts that the Government's plan is to force Auckland to privatise the Ports of Auckland and other choice infrastructure assets to fund public transport.

"Len Brown won't withstand the pressure," John adds. "He's a roll-over mayor. He rejects road tolls and congestion charges - "driving low-income workers off the roads" - as alternative funding mechanisms.

"The cost of congestion should be put on employers and businesses, rather than low income workers," he insists. "We can gridlock-free the city within 12 months, at at least half the cost of these new roading projects. If the people of Auckland speak with a loud voice, the government will follow."

No-one – apart from some for the wilder ideologues of the Right – disputes that Auckland needs better, more frequent and more comprehensive public transport. At the moment, commuters face a choice of "two expensive options", as Minto puts it. Free and frequent public transport would clear congestion from the roads and thus offer two good options.

Nevertheless, we put to John some of the arguments raised against free public transport: that it would cause the system to collapse under too much demand, that homeless people would sleep on the buses and cause a nuisance, and that Auckland is too big for such a trial to work.

John showed very little patience for the first two arguments, calling them "brainless" and "bullshit". He doesn't see any difficulty with doubling the number

of buses on the road before the Central Rail Link comes online. But what about the fact that the cities where free PT has been trialled – such as Tallinn, the capital of Estonia – are quite a bit smaller than Auckland?

"Many cities of all sizes around the world are now looking at free public transport," John argues. "It has traditionally been a thing in smaller towns and cities, but it's moving into the bigger ones. Auckland is ideally placed to benefit – everything has been designed for cars here. We can break out of this with free and frequent public transport. It will change the culture of Auckland, the way that people see themselves and their place in the city."

For this reason, Minto is not in favour of immediately removing minimum parking requirements for business and homes, which some argue would make for cheaper housing. "There are families living way out west or south who currently need three, four or even five cars. But this will change once free public transport becomes a reality."

## Affordable housing

The second major policy of John's campaign has been dealing with Auckland's housing crisis. The current Council's Unity Plan promotes a future of intensified (apartment, flat or townhouse) housing, as opposed to the sprawl of stand-alone houses which currently constitutes Auckland suburbia. Does John agree with the arguments of some activists that this is a recipe for "slumification"?

"In the case of [the working-class suburb of] Glen Innes, it absolutely is," says Minto. "They're replacing existing state housing with 8-story slums in the town centre. We've seen this happen overseas – they'll be rubbish-quality." He adds that the Council are handing social housing over to the private sector, "so you have an additional landlord screwing you as well as the state. The Unitary Plan is a blueprint for developers, not

for communities.”

“There are affordability issues across Auckland, but the sharpest point is on low-income families who need affordable rental homes,” John argues. MANA’s solution is to build “20,000 state-of-the-art, warm, dry, affordable rental homes” on Council-owned land. These will be “a mix” of stand-alone and high-density housing. Minto admits that “inevitably there will be a huge waiting list”, but in his first term as Mayor he could commit to getting all the building projects underway.

Minto has no problem with the idea of intensification, or that Auckland should be growing “up” rather than out. But he insists that low-income families will still need stand-alone housing. “Families need wide spaces to grow up in – they’re not growing to grow up on the sixth floor of an apartment building.”

How would Mayor Minto deal with the issue of homelessness, given the Auckland Council’s recent by-law against “nuisance” begging? John points out that this is the result of the “massive inequality” brought to New Zealand by neo-liberalism and the economic crisis. “The most useful thing we could do would be to reduce inequality over all. We could improve our education, our health, all of our social indicators which have gone backwards over the last decades.”

## Equality and democracy

The third major policy of the Minto campaign is for a living wage for all Council employees and contractors, backed by a “maximum wage” for its leaders. This would lead to the Mayor taking a small pay cut, and the CEO of the Council taking a large one.

MANA is additionally standing twelve candidates for the Council and the various local boards in working-class South and West Auckland. Minto doesn’t necessarily want a reversal of the “Super City” amalgamation of Auckland under a single council – but insists on a shift

in power within the organisation, as his fourth major policy.

“The current Super City is not democratic at all. Three quarters of the rates charged go to the CCOs, where there’s no accountability. We’re saying that they have to come back under the democratic control of the people of Auckland. This far-right model has introduced private sector values of greed and ratcheting up of senior managers’ salaries.”

Quite presciently, Minto talks about “needing to look at the whole contracting model under the Super City”, currently worth about \$800 million. “We want to move away from contracting, back to employing people directly. It provides greater stability, and cuts out the middle-man.”

(About a week after we did this interview, the news came out that the CCO Auckland Transport had reported possible corruption among its contractors to the Serious Fraud Office, and a senior manager had been stood down.)

But Minto insists that MANA doesn’t want for the Auckland Council to become “a big Stalinist centralised bureaucracy.” He calls for a devolution of power to the 21 local boards under the Super City. “We want local communities given decisions for themselves on fast food outlets, liquor outlets, and pokies [slot machines] in their areas – where, and how many.” These community organisations could also be empowered to deal with local petty crime

“In this way, we can build a real grassroots democracy in Auckland. What we have is mass disillusionment – not apathy. Only 40% of people will probably vote in this election – thinking, no matter who I vote for, it doesn’t matter.”

## What side he’s on

So what’s the feeling out on the streets? “We’ve got some really good coverage of the public transport policy,” John says. “Len Brown wants to ignore all policy debate, because he wants to coast

through on... nothing, really – a big grin and PR spin.

“It’s my role to cut through that and put policies forward. By the time this campaign is finished, people will know which side we’re on.” Minto doubts that younger people and immigrant communities will be even be aware of his activist history about which the mass media seem fascinated. “I’ve been out there talking, and getting really positive feedback.”

“MANA has policies for everybody,” John emphasises. However, he thinks it’s really good for the revolutionary left to be involved in such a “broad” campaign.

“We do need revolutionary change, however you see that happening. New Zealand has become so laissez-faire in economics that the Chinese are lecturing us about it. We need to work towards a Kiwi socialism, that won’t necessarily look like socialism in any other country.”

“But you have to take people from where they’re at. If you come in from the outside and preach at people – as so many leftists have over the years – people don’t understand the message, and you have a complete disconnect. We have to win people to these big policies – and when they see the power that they have to implement such against, the whole world opens up.”

“We can dramatically change our economy, get rid of the parasites from it, bring back community controls.” Minto talks about the Mondragon co-operative in the Basque Country within Spain, which has accomplished “zero unemployment” in its areas. “There’s all sorts of models.”

And what’s John Minto’s future? “I’m committed to MANA seeing through to the end of next year. We’ll see if we’re able to break into to the Pakeha world and engage people. If not, it’s probably the wrong vehicle at the wrong time. I’m pretty relaxed about it, but I’m going to give it my everything.”

# Elections



- A Wellington hospital nurse committed to putting the care back into aged care
- no cuts, no privatisation
- local democracy, not remote bureaucracy
- an "ambulance at the top of the cliff" approach to healthcare
- Whānau Ora: family well-being for all



**Vote  
Grant  
Brookes**

**#1 for Capital & Coast District Health Board**

## Grant Brookes for Capital and Coast DHB

*Grant Brookes, Fightback member, is standing for election to Capital and Coast District Health Board (DHB) at the upcoming 2013 local body elections. Brookes is standing on a Health First ticket, endorsed by the Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the MANA Movement. Fightback writer Ian Anderson interviewed him.*

**FB:** What are your goals in standing for election to the Capital and Coast District Health Board?

**GB:** Elections are a difficult arena for activists. They favour candidates with big budgets, high public profiles and easy access to mainstream media, who trade off conventional memes – in other words, the mouthpieces of the rich and powerful.

But contesting elections is an important part of building a mass movement for radical change.

Many goals can be served by standing. For example, standing in elections can help legitimise and popularise radical ideas, raise the profile of socialist groups and recruit new members, put pressure on political parties which claim to represent working class and oppressed groups, and so on.

I have stood in elections in the past in pursuit of some of these goals.

But I am standing for election to the Capital and Coast District Health Board this October with the aim of winning a seat. This different goal colours all aspects of my campaign.

**FB:** What is the nature of the role?

**GB:** The Board is made up of seven elected members, and up to four members appointed by the minister of health.

It provides “governance” for the DHB. So basically that means setting broad priorities for healthcare in the district, taking responsibility for outcomes, putting together a budget and annual plan and so on, under the auspices of the NZ Public Health & Disability Act 2000.

But it's stunted governance, because the Act as passed by Labour made even the elected Board members accountable not to the electorate, but to the minister of health.

Recent amendments by National have given the health minister even more powers. He can now essentially veto board decisions, impose ministerial directives and replace an elected board with an appointed commissioner, like

the education minister is doing in a growing number of schools.

In a presentation to the July meeting of the Nurses Organisation's Regional Council, I said there is a danger that District Health Boards could become mere window dressing for government policy decisions, unless Board members are prepared to claim their democratic mandate to speak out.

**FB:** What has been your involvement in the Nurses Organisation, and what struggles has the organisation waged in the District Health Boards?

**GB:** For the last eleven years I have been a delegate for the Nurses Organisation, and have represented members at Capital & Coast DHB on our union's National Delegates Committee since 2008. More recently, I have chaired the Greater Wellington Regional Council. I currently represent Greater Wellington on the NZNO Board of Directors and I'm the convenor of the National Delegates Committee.

What drew me (and many other others) into NZNO activity was the Fair Pay campaign of 2003-4. Delivering pay rises of 20-30 percent, this remains the biggest struggle waged by the union in the DHBs in a generation.

Since then, the main extended campaign in the Sector has been for Safe Staffing, Healthy Workplaces. The goal is to get sufficient staffing in every DHB to match the fluctuating health-care demand. It's a work in progress.

Although I am endorsed by the Nurses Organisation, I am not representing the union in this election. Rather, I aim to be a voice for the health of the disadvantaged majority of the population.

**FB:** What would you say are the main problems confronting nurses, and others in healthcare?

**GB:** The main problem confronting the health system is underfunding.

Council of Trade Unions economist Bill Rosenberg calculates that the health budget was \$238 million short of the amount needed to meet costs this year.

Health has been similarly underfunded for at least the last three years.

This is driving care rationing, in all sectors. People can wait weeks to see a GP. Dependent rest home residents are washed less often. Patients have to be sicker before they see a hospital specialist. Workloads for nurses and other healthworkers are rising.

Health is also being run increasingly according to bureaucratic directives. A handful of "health targets" are prioritised, at the expense of health in general – just as "national standards" in schools are reducing education to the acquisition of a very narrow range of skills.

And while the health system is being compromised in this way, inequality and other social determinants of health are making for a sicker population.

**FB:** What would a just health system look like?

**GB:** A just health system would create health equality, where health status is not shaped by ethnicity or income.

It would be democratically controlled by healthworkers and health service users, or patients.

It would be universally accessible and free – from primary health to tertiary care, including dental services, aged care and optometry – because health would be recognised as a human right.

It would see individual health as the product of social conditions, and work with other agencies to address social determinants of health such as housing, income, alienation and so on – similar to the original vision of Whānau Ora.



Grant has a large group of volunteers distributing thousands of leaflets across the wider Wellington region.

# Elections/History

It would be part of a cooperative, egalitarian society where resources are democratically allocated and directed according to need.

Bits of it might like the community clinics, or Misiōnes, established as part of Venezuela's transition towards "socialism for the 21st century".

In other words, it would be radically different from the health system we have now.

**FB:** How can others in the commu-

nity support the struggle against cuts, against privatisation, and for public healthcare?

**GB:** Community "support" will never be enough – particularly given emasculation of the District Health Boards of real decision-making power. Cuts and privatisation will only be reversed by a mass struggle of, and by the community. And by community, I mean the working class majority, organised in unions, parties, clubs, marae, groups and so on.

The role of elected District Health

Board member, as I see it, is to be a mouthpiece for this struggle to greatest extent possible under the law.

There is also an important role for the few health experts and academics willing to side completely with the disadvantaged majority.

Watch this space!

[[healthfirst.net.nz](http://healthfirst.net.nz)]

[[facebook.com/healthfirst.net.nz](https://facebook.com/healthfirst.net.nz)]



# Witness to a revolution

by Michael Kyriazopoulos, Auckland  
Fightback branch

As I approach the end of my life due to Motor Neurone Disease I have been reading the fragments of memoirs recorded by my maternal grandmother in the final years of her life. Virtually all of what she wrote centred on her ex-

periences as a refugee in Russia, which clearly left a deep impression on her.

On wintry days I remember my mother looking intently at the crystal formations on the window panes. Slowly and carefully she would translate these delicate patterns into fine crochet work - fragile and intricate as spider-

webs. Mother was a person who combined her fine gifts with practicality, this would get us through the harsh days that were to shatter our beautiful world. Yes, my early childhood was filled with warmth, love and comfort.

So it begins. My gran was born Mary Blumenstock in 1907 in Tukums, Latvia.

Her Jewish family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, keeping a maid and a summer house. Mary's father was a successful timber merchant, but one day everything changed forever with the outbreak of the First World War. Her father and brother joined the Imperial Army and Mary and her mother went to live in a refugee settlement near Syzran. Although the language was foreign to her, Mary quickly picked up Russian and before long had won the school essay writing competition. She received a bag of sweets as a prize which she shared with her classmates and teachers. Her story was adapted as a school play which raised money to buy shoes and clothes for refugee children.

Mary helped her mother rolling cigarettes from which they eked out a meagre livelihood. Two and a half years after coming to Russia with the war still raging the situation was bleak:

Milk was now becoming scarce and the bread tasted dry as wood shavings. We could not buy kerosene for our lanterns, nor candles or soap. Our school meals usually consisted of two potatoes in their jackets and a small piece of herring. We also had a mug of black coffee without sugar, which I would give to another child. One of my potatoes I slipped into my pocket to take home to mama.

My gran recalled their clandestine preparations for the festival of Passover when Jews traditionally eat Matzah, unleavened bread. Matzah was banned in Russia and it was forbidden to even bake it yourself. Mary's job was to keep a lookout while the women worked quickly and quietly, tracing tiny holes in the round shapes of dough before placing them in the oven.

One morning just as the school bell was ringing Tzarist police were pursuing a group of students. The students jumped over the school wall and the police started firing at them. Mary's beloved

school teacher Anna Michaelovna was shot while trying to shield the children. She later died from her wounds and Mary was distraught for days. Thereafter the street fighting became so fierce that school was closed and Mary was obliged to stay indoors. Eventually Mary became sick of being cooped up and announced to her mother she was going to the shirt factory to find a job. She was given the task of sewing buttons and at the end of the month she was given two Roubles. After a few months it became too dangerous to walk the streets: the wounded and the dying lay in the gutters. The factory then brought work to their house for Mary and her mother to complete each day.

Mother and daughter befriended Vanya, a peasant who worked on the nearby Sameluk estate. He would often bring over the Sameluk's little boy Peter as a playmate for Mary. Vanya also became their main source of news, informing them that masses of soldiers were now deserting and fighting on the side of the Bolsheviks. Mary overheard Vanya saying that the Bolsheviks would take away the estate from the Sameluk family and that would leave him and his wife without livelihood or a home.

Eventually the school reopened but there was no sign that the war was coming to an end. One afternoon Vanya brought in the news that the war minister had ordered their soldiers to fight on the last man. They had mobilised a big squadron to the front line and had driven the German army back. Mary was glad her mother could not fully understand his words as she would have only been worried about her son Jacob. As Mary was dressing for school one winter morning a sudden explosion ripped right through the window and made a hole in the opposite wall. As she stared out the hole she saw an elegant sleigh appear leaving the Sameluk estate:

I watched as it drew nearer and saw Peter seated between his two

sisters. They were facing Madame Sameluk and the English governess. The two girls were wearing long fur capes with hoods, while Peter wore a grey Papcha - a tall karakul fur hat and a shakell - a military-style coat, he looked like a miniature Cossack. His mother and the old governess, who was a duchess, wore black fur capes. The whole sleigh was covered in fur blankets and saw the girls each had fur muffs. Their hands won't be freezing I thought as I rubbed my own hands together.

In November 1917 Vanya and his wife appeared on Mary's doorstep with the news of the storming of the winter palace and the arrest of the Tsar and his family. The couple started crying and making the sign of the cross over their hearts. As Mary recalled, "Mama and I could not feel very upset at the arrest of the Tsar, we were only concerned about getting home and reuniting with our family."

At last they received a letter from Jacob. He was now working for a co-operative belonging to the People's Organisation which was being run by the new government. Mary and her mother could at last visit Vanya's family in their little icon filled hut, which the Sameluk's would not have allowed before.

On a hot July day in 1918 Mary witnessed an extraordinary sight while walking home from school:

People were dancing in the street, there was singing and shouting and laughter everywhere. There were large pictures of Lenin hanging from the building draped in red silk. Men were throwing up their hats into the air and people were embracing. I knew something had happened, but what? I tugged on a tall man's sleeve. "Excuse me sir, what has happened, why is everyone so excited?" I asked.

# History

"Why, have you not heard Tsar Nicholas and the Tsarina and the children have been executed. Even that devil Rasputin too!". I stared at him in horror. How could the death of the royal family cause such joy. Were they responsible for all those thousands of young soldiers being slaughtered on the battlefields. For all the orphaned children, for so much suffering. If so I began to understand the rejoicing of the people.

Vanya told Mary that officials had come to the estate and told him he could stay in the hut, but would be required to submit a daily account of all the produce. However Vanya was worried about this task due to his poor spelling. Mary offered to teach him, "And soon Vanya was writing all the words he needed, such as eggs, potatoes, chicken, apples and so on. He was very proud and eager to learn."

At last it was time to go home, Mary's mother caught a fever travelling on a cattle truck on the train. The train track to Tukums was too badly damaged so they had to alight at Shmalden Forest in Kurland. They got a ride by horse and cart into town which Mary's mother paid for with her wedding ring. When they finally reached their street the buildings were completely bombed out. They found shelter in a relative's home that had been completely looted. Mary attempted to nurse her deteriorating mother, picking wild berries and mushrooms from the forest to feed her. However she died before her father returned.

I find my gran's resourcefulness as a young girl truly astonishing. She was constantly doing street collections for the refugee fund even though she and her mother were destitute themselves. It is remarkable how some seventy years later she was able to vividly recall a special fish soup meal made by her mother, or a gift of yellow plums from Vanya. No doubt a consequence of living

on the brink of starvation.

From the uprising of 1905, drowned in a bloodbath of Tsarist reac-

throw their hands up in despair of any prospect for a classless society. But such despondency is misplaced. We should instead recall William Morris's words

in *A Dream of John Ball*, in



tion, through to the days of hope of the Bolshevik Revolution rapidly followed by the Civil War, the Russian Revolution always had a heavy dose of tragedy. Of course isolated as it was in a backward country, the infant workers' state eventually succumbed to totalitarian Stalinist counter revolution. It's enough to make many faint-hearts

which the narrator ponders, "How men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."